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Disjecti membra Poetae

"The scattered relics of the bard."

QUIDNONIANA.

No I.

The making of poetry if inspiration be not a humbug should seem to be the most spiritual exercise of mind. It is true, that if a poet cared a farthing for self styled critics, and paid any regard to their directions, verses would be made like broad cloth and any one might be taught the trade in a few months, who knew how to read and write. The subject of intellectual devotion, would go to work like a methodist who prays secundum artem, in the right Wesleyan attitude; to wit, in a stiff posture, directly opposite to any relaxation of the frame whatever; to the end no doubt that being constantly in a bodily agony, their religious elevation may be restrained within proper bounds! For if this were not the case, many would have jumped out of their skins before this.

But there is, undoubtedly, a mechanism in every thing. By line and rule, work many a fool. But the converse of the proposition does not hold good. No wise man, and no man of genius works without either square or compass.

The process of great machinery, has been in all ages similar; and, considered merely in the coarse outline, appears extremely mechanical. When common figures were exhausted, and one country or one war drained of its incident and imagery, as general topics are narrowed, the imagination is of course more subject to sentiment, and instead of leading is led. Our modern picturesters all put their heroes at the tail of their carts; while, in the shape of Notes, they rein in their chargers in the Irish fashion by tying large stones to their tails. Appended to their cart follows the reader; and if the bard be of grovelling propensities, his friends in the rear get well acquainted with mud.

When a poet has prepared for his verses a 'local habitation' by laying the scene, and a name, by the introduction of some renowned hero of antiquity, the outlines of his plot are arranged, by the imagination - asso-

-ted by history or not, as the case may be. In one instance, judgment is employed, in determining the bounds of probability; in the other the judgment and imagination are both employed in reconciling truth and fiction; without outraging the former, and without restraining the interest, which the latter is capable of exciting. The power of seizing the attention and working upon the feelings seems to be appropriated exclusively to the imagination, when an author writes for the world. In addressing men viva voce, other faculties are called into exercise: the powers of extemporaneous eloquence depending on a peculiar tact.

In the imagery and figures of the growing poem, the peculiarity of the art is remarkably conspicuous. Figures, under which critical diwhich they may happen to fail, should seem to spring from the very purity and abstraction of inspiration; (if as we before remarked, the s~~ignation~~piration be any thing more than a name) — whereas, there is more mechanism in their origination and management, than in any other part of the work. This is to be considered as applying to Poets, not rhyme stringers; and to poets who are more or less of the ballad or epic order; who lay their scene, with the intention of preserving costume in its unity.

Many an uninteresting and stupid volume must be waded through; many a provoking traveller must be borne with, for the sake of acquiring necessary local information and of appropriating novel and particular facts, or at least, such as can be referred to in a new light, to the use of the Poet, whenever flagging description can be rendered energetic, or conception more vivid, by allusion, simile or metaphor. A body of these crude materials being collected, and separated for the alchemy of poetry, there is a mechanism in the mode of using them. Similes rarely suggest themselves. When the bard has got out of the common road of downright and plain narration, which is so dangerous to the spirit of poetical elevation, he feels that without the assistance of comparison his pinions are clogged, and the stilts of measured feet are a leaden incumbrance. He seeks for some fit subject of allusion, and thus the simile is produced.

Without saying any thing of taste, a compound of imagination and judgment, of natural tact and acquired polish, according to Dr Blair, (who had no taste) — we may observe that in the mechanism of this proceeding, as relates to the mind, (for it is much assisted by other aid than that of exalted intellect) – the imagination is on its wing in observing, and the Judgment on its legs in selecting the subjects of simile in the first place. In applying them, Imagination detects resemblances, and Judgment so orders their comparison, that the likeness shall not be lost on the reader.

But it may be asked, what is the object of all this mistification? We know that if men submit to critical canons, or the imposing sway of prescription, they must move by mechanism throughout their course; but you speak of mechanism independent of law or custom and in the very essence, and *divinus afflatus* of the art?

It is easy to explain ourselves; and, although in the province of criticism, and every thing therewith connected, nothing is more derogatory to the character of the autocrat dogmatist, than explanation, we are per-

-fectly willing to condescend at present, as we are not afraid of being understood.

We are by no means certain, that simile and metaphor ever were spontaneous. When a savage warrior sings the war song, or harrangues his countrymen with the desire of exciting them, he either uses tropes and allusions that have long been conventional and familiar with his nation, or strains his recollections for some image suited to hyperbole. In neither instance, is the resulting figure the uncalled for growth of an imagination, labouring and parturient by its own nature, and prolific by its own miraculous energy. If, when Adam named the animals, he went through their species by the aid of imagination, as for instance if he named the eagle from his swiftness of flight or his supremacy over the fowls of the air, he made one step towards a metaphor; and yet, inasmuch as he pursued a regular system, there was a mechanism in the method he used. This gem of personification, however, in applying the name of a real or imaginary attribute, to the creature to which it appertained, can scarcely be called a figure; certainly not, when applied to a quadruped; since the statute informs us that

Nullum simile quatuor pedibus currit.

At any rate, after the perception of the first resemblance, which is out of the province of logic, when poetry became an art, and the poet a distinct personage, imagination herself moved by mental machinery. She did not soar on unassisted pinions; when she chaunted a regular theme, the complexion of her inspiration was not that of the Pythoness on the tripod; to support an idea she called in the assistance of simile; she sought for something in nature, which, by her own logic, she could class in the same species with that idea; and this is a mechanical proceeding.

At the present day, when the same figures are employed for the thousandth time which would have been too trite for the first Orpheus; when the best poets are driven to the wildest mythology of savages for machinery, and to the extravagancies of nature for metaphor, Poetry has become mechanical, palpably in every feature.

We mean not these remarks as any apology for modern doggerelists. Their poverty of invention would have been as great, if they had lived before the flood. Happy is it for them, that they can console themselves with the stale pretext of exhausted art and nature, as a palliation of their imbecility; while the world has produced so many poets, that they can purloin their strength, without the fear of detection.

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